# Chairman acts to avert walkout of probe staff

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WASHINGTON — The chairman of the revived House Select Committee on Assassinations met today with the panel's staff members in an effort to stave off a possible crippling walkout of former chief counsel Richard A. Sprague's top investigators.

The emergency session was called by chairman Louis Stokes, D-Ohio, amid reports Sprague's two key deputies, Robert Lehner and Robert Tannenbaum, and others on Sprague's staff planned to leave as a result of the controversial counsel's resignation Wednesday.

A staff exodus would be another blow to the panel, which only Wednesday won a narrow 230-to-181 House vote to extend its probes into the murders of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr. The panel, which would have expired today, now has almost another two years in the 95th Congress to investigate the assassinations.

Most of the 72 staff employees remain intensely loyal to Sprague, the former Philadelphia prosecutor who resigned only hours before the House vote when it became clear the panel's continued existence was jeopardized by House opposition to his staff leadership.

A staff spokesman said no resignations had been submitted so far and that the purpose of Stokes' appearance today was to convince the committee's attorneys and investigators that the inquiries should go forward without Sprague.

"Everybody wants to think about it right now, but I would say the situation is very fluid, very changeable," said spokesman Burton Chardak. "I'm not saying this is a permanent thing and

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there very well could be some high-level resignations later on."

Tannenbaum is deputy chief counsel for the panel's work on the Kennedy assassination, and Lehner heads the King assassination inquiries. The two worked directly under Sprague and have been given substantial authority in the investigation.

"I think both of them were thinking about leaving, but as the shock of Sprague's resignation wears off, they may change their minds," Chardak said. "But the feeling is they will stay for a judicious interval until someone is found to take their places."

Chardak said the meeting lasted about half an hour and the staff applauded Stokes when he arrived. According to Chardak, Stokes asked the employees "to bear with me," in efforts to reassemble the operation of the committee, which has now lost two chairmen and it's top professional, Sprague.

The House vote and the often acrimonious debate leading up to it culminated weeks of strife, public accusations and harsh recriminations which, by members' own estimates, seemed destined to kill the committee as recently as the day of the vote.

Sprague's surprise departure, decided at a late night session with Stokes and ranking panel members, climaxed his bitter feud with Texas Democrat Henry B. Gonzalez and was the breakthrough in the committee's fight for survival.

Gonzalez last month stepped down as chairman of the panel after an abortive attempt to fire Sprague.

The committee's continued existence has since been attacked by many congressmen over what they saw as humiliation of a fellow House member in Gonzalez' losing battle with Sprague.

The Texas delegation seemed especially susceptible to the bitterness of Gonzalez. Sixteen Texans, including Democrat Jim Mattox and Republican Jim Collins, voted to kill the committee — a switch of nine votes.

Only Majority Leader Jim Wright of Fort Worth, Barbara Jordan of Houston and Bob Krueger of New Braunfels — all Democrats — voted to continue the probes. Corpus Christi Democrat John Young voted "present." Even Gonzalez, who for years fought for the creation of the investigations committee, was negative.

Despite the absence of Sprague as a target, opponents of the panel fought its resurrection to the end, lashing out at its internal dissension, proposed expense and what they felt was the lack of any real chance for producing new evidence.

Other members were concerned over what they saw as the panel's potential for violating the civil rights of witnesses. Rep. Charles Wiggins, R-Calif., criticized what he said were tactics reminiscent of the notorious "Communist hunts" of Sen. Joe McCarthy in the 1950s.

Texas Democrat J. J. Pickle of Austin claimed the committee had already been so discredited its work should be transferred to a Justice Department task force. "This investigating committee is a sick cat," he said, "and you can't mend it or patch it up."

On the House floor and at a mid-morning meeting, committee members said they were accepting Sprague's resignation "with regret" because they felt "character assassination" had forced him out.